

Jeremiah 50:1-20 Hammering The Hammer Falls Ch. AM 7/30/2023

The first 8 words of verse 1 introduce a large literary unit of chapters of 50 and 51, “*The word that the LORD spoke concerning Babylon...*” Let me introduce the two chapters, and then we will study only the first 20 verses today. These two chapters will disturb us by placing God’s exhaustingly gruesome devastation of some, right next to hope-giving moments of God’s promise to others.

That is intentional. These two chapters are doing two things at the same time: announcing God’s crushing judgment on Babylon, and announcing as a direct result, that the long-sinners and chastised exiles will finally be able to return to their own land, now as God’s redeemed and forgiven people.

The language of two chapters intentionally takes us beyond the twin event of the fall of one ancient nation and the revival and homecoming of another ancient nation. Jeremiah wrote using global language that takes us to a planetary level. How God deals with Babylon and Israel is meant to take on a symbolic weightiness for all generations, including ours. These two important chapters are presented to us as a picture of the future workings of God’s final and universal judgment. God will judge any and all who stand in arrogant and evil opposition to God. In tandem with that, God will extend His offer of restoration to include people from any nation.

Evil will be judged and destroyed, and God’s people will be set free from bondage. As we read chapters 50 and 51, we are compelled to anticipate the worldwide accomplishment of Christ’s 1st coming, and His cross and resurrection. Beyond that, in these chapters we are even persuaded to look for the 2nd coming of Christ, and the climactic events that will accompany His final arrival with dual outcomes of both judgment and salvation.

So, it is not surprising that these two chapters have a strong echo in the Book of Revelation. Namely, victory for God will spell death for Babylon, and all that Babylon stands for, and simultaneously, victory for God will spell life for God’s people, and anyone else who similarly receives from God the same restoration.

For example, Revelation chapter 18, which I will briefly summarize by reading a series of phrases from it, “*Fallen, Fallen is Babylon....Come out of her, My people, ...for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities ...Pay her back as she herself has paid back others...for mighty is the LORD God who has judged her...in a single hour [Babylon] has been laid waste. Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her.*”

So the Book of Jeremiah, and the Gospels, and the Book of Revelation answer an important question for Christians - how can we rejoice, while we are hearing of destruction of Babylon, destruction of Christ on the cross, and destruction of people in God’s future damnation?

Our mini-orientation to chapters 50 and 51 has already helped us find the answer – it is found in the intertwining of judgment and redemption as two results of the coming of The LORD our one God. We can rejoice in judgment the same way that a victim’s family rejoices at a court’s verdict of guilty against a vicious criminal. The crime scene caused their lives to be intertwined. Only when evil is appropriately stopped, can blessings again flow. Our lives are intertwined with the evil of this world, so we rejoice in the coming of the LORD to make wrongs right. Let’s take this truth with us as we now focus on the first 20 verses of Jeremiah chapter 50, **we anticipate rejoicing about the end of evil, since God promised to destroy every enemy and to save His sheep.**

1. God’s announcement concerning Babylon. (v.1-10)

Verse 1, “*concerning Babylon.*” This is a bit surprising, since we might have thought we were done after God’s judgment on many nations in chapters 46-49. And Babylon was working for God, right? What is this about God’s judgment against Babylon, then? Verse 2, This new announcement that the LORD spoke concerning Babylon was to be distributed far and wide, and instructions to do so were given to God’s prophets, God’s messengers. Listen to the many collected verbs of verse 2, “*Declare, set up, proclaim, conceal it not, and say..*” Say what? Babylon is taken! The conqueror is not named yet, because the identity does not matter. What matters is that the previously invincible Babylon has been overthrown. Babylon was captured! This is military, but it has immediate spiritual implications, because next are listed the false gods of Babylon. When Babylon was defeated, the false gods of Babylon were defeated. The failure of an empire was the failure of its gods. Babylon’s false gods were put to shame and dismayed.

Verse 3, “*out of the north a nation has come up against her.*” Wait. Throughout our study of the Book of Jeremiah, Babylon was always the nation out of the north that came against Judah. But now there is a different army out of the north that will come against what we had previously been trained was the nation out of the north. This why I selected the title of the sermon Hammering the Hammer, to display the big announcement of the big reversal here. God reversed Himself and God began hammering the hammer! The purposes of God and the purposes of Babylon, which had been lined up for so long, were now at strong odds with each other. Formerly, God’s people were called to submit to God, which meant submitting to Babylon and willingly going into exile, but now with the reversal, God’s people submitting to God will mean fleeing from Babylon!

Understanding this truth is significant for the whole Book of Jeremiah, the whole Bible, and even understanding God’s future actions in the world! By the end of the Book of Jeremiah, we are left not with The LORD plus Babylon, but rather we are left with only The LORD! The lesson is clear – in the end, we all face only

the power of the LORD. The LORD alone will prevail in His own way, at His own time, with His own means, and that truth must be faced and accepted.

What would be the implications for Israel? That was answered in verses 4-5, and the good news was the forgiveness of God, the end of exile and the ability to come back home! The Book of Jeremiah has had the exile as a major theme, and now suddenly 70 years has passed and the exile was over! The weak exiles in godly sorrow and in the grief of true penitence will return to Jerusalem, returning even to the site of the destroyed temple, and ultimately returning to God Himself.

Verses 4-5 are a strong echo of God's promises of restoration for His people, which we studied back in the classic chapters 30-31. This is a reminder and a recap of the new covenant promise of forgiveness by the LORD God, and a close relationship to the LORD God. As verse 4 says, "...*they shall seek the LORD their God.*" Will God take them back? Yes! We have here a brief summary of the beautiful and memorable statement of God in chapter 31:31-34, "*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant ... I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know Me...*"

Verse 6, God's people were lost sheep. They previously had bad kings and priests, who were bad shepherds that resulted in lost and wandering sheep, sheep without a fold, and sheep at risk. So, it is not a surprise to hear about the consequence in verse 7, that the sheep of God were found by their enemies and devoured by their enemies. Notice that the enemies developed a theory when they devoured the sheep of God – because the people of God had sinned against God and sin caused an exile, that the enemy nations were not guilty! But they were mistaken. By verse 17, the image for God's people will descend down from lost sheep to hunted sheep, who had been already previously devoured by the king of Assyria. How could it get worse? Well, the new and worse situation for these poor sheep was that now the king of Babylon was pictured as a lion gnawing on the bones of the sheep! As a result, we are told in verse 18, God will bring punishment on Babylon, just like God brought punishment on Assyria, both for actions against God's sheep.

Back up to verse 7, it is fascinating how the Babylonians understood the sin of Israel and that the hope of Israel was supposed to be The LORD. The Babylonians even used God's correct and proper name - The LORD. The Babylonians understood the cost of sin in a way better than the kings of Israel had understood it. The Babylonians were astute enough to grasp the error of the ways of Israel - the only root of hope for the people of Israel was what their forefathers had known – to look to the LORD alone as their only hope.

In verse 8, even though this sin is the reason for Israel to be in exile, there is mercy in God's command to Israel to flee from Babylon, as the eager first ones out

of the gate, just like when the gate of the pasture is opened, the male goats run out of the pasture before the lambs do! this is part of why the exiles need to be ready to flee, because God's judgment is coming! God was calling on the exiles to be ready to flee, not because of the theory of God's enemies, but rather because of the covenant of God, which had been so long disrupted by the exile. The fleeing from exile represents a return to the covenant of God. The covenant, we remember, was set up as an everlasting covenant! God's covenant is what reversed the exile! God's covenant promise is what reversed the destiny of Babylon and secured the destiny of Israel.

Verses 9-10 tell us that the enemy from the North whom God will bring against Babylon was actually going to be a gathering of various great nations from the north country. All of those nations will stand together against Babylon. Babylon had been the hammer from the north, and now would suffer the same fate that Babylon had caused on Jerusalem, to be done by a bigger hammer from the north, an alliance of great nations.

2. God's vengeance on Babylon. (v.11-16)

Verse 11, this prophetic poem started out by addressing Babylon. God spoke to them by saying, "*O plunderers of My heritage...*" The sins of Babylon were to be greedy to plunder Jerusalem, as hungry as a cow in a green field, as aggressive as a horse wanting to mate, both having no restraint. Babylon thought that they could break all the rules of civility and do whatever they wanted with God's people, and never be confronted. But verse 12 says that Babylon knew better. Their mothers (which is poetic language for the more noble history of Babylon) taught them better, but they disgraced their mothers. Babylon failed to reckon with the LORD God. Babylon knew that these people living in Jerusalem were the LORD's people, and that just as the LORD's own people must face God for their sins, so too Babylon must face God for their sins. Babylon entered Jerusalem and was self-indulgent, not self-controlled. Babylon ran loose and free in their animal-like frolics, but now God announced that the party is over. Verse 13 gives a hint that it won't be pretty, because everyone who witnesses what God will do to Babylon will be appalled at all of the wounds of Babylon.

Verse 14, God began to address the new unnamed superpower, the coalition that was attacking Babylon. This tells us why God will judge Babylon, with this phrase, "*...for she has sinned against the LORD.*" Verse 15 confirmed that all of this military activity against Babylon is properly understood one way, "*this is the vengeance of The LORD...*" Verse 15 ends with this statement, "*do to her as she has done...*" In other words, what Babylon had done to others, God will visit on their own heads, and that is expressed in verse 16. It strikes home to us that history is the working out of the LORD's will on all the nations, as the means of shepherding His own people.

There are actually two great and intertwined reversals – the situation of sinning Israel in exile being forgiven and brought home, and the situation of the hammer Babylon on top of the world, being brought down by God’s order.

This is a picture of what future judgment of God will be for the world – those who stand in everlasting covenant with God through Christ, will be transferred from the realm of judgment to the realm of grace and forgiveness, while those who stand in flaunted rebellion against God will move from the role of aggressive plunderers to the realm of utter and permanent defeat, by order from God Himself.

3. God’s restoration and new covenant for Israel. (v.17-20)

In verse 17, the picture is now used of a shepherd and sheep, in order to present God’s dealings with His people. Israel was a vulnerable flock of sheep, exposed to the danger of being hunted by ravenous lions. Two lions are identified as first Assyria, then Babylon. Israel’s life, like helpless sheep, has been lived under the threat of these two lions for a long time. The shepherd seems missing.

But suddenly in verse 18, this sheep/lion scene is changed when the Shepherd appears and speaks. On behalf of His sheep, God will visit the lion Babylon, like previously God visited the lion Assyria. A pattern emerges. Whenever God visits the lions, good things happen for the sheep Israel. Like what? The flock of sheep known as Israel gets to return to its pasture. Verse 19, God followed through with His own analogy of tending to His sheep when God said, *“I will restore Israel to his pasture, and he shall feed on Carmel and in Bashan, and his desire shall be satisfied on the hills of Ephraim and in Gilead.”*

But this is a return to the situation they had before. What is to prevent the sheep from their own weaknesses – what is to prevent the sheep from yet another fall into sin, yet another lion attack, and yet another exile? What about their sin? The phrase at the beginning of Jeremiah 50:20 is *“In those days and at that time, declares the LORD...”* and that is the formula for the visions about the Messiah and the age that the Messiah will bring. The vision of pardon and the vision of blessings belong to the future time when the Messiah would come.

Thankfully, the true Shepherd has made provisions in the new arrangement that have factored in the weakness of His sheep. Verse 20, *“...iniquity shall be sought in Israel, and there shall be none, and sin [shall be sought] in Judah, and none shall be found, for I will pardon those whom I leave as a remnant.”*

The flock of sheep received back their pasture, and this time, they are secure in it! Fitting with the analogy of sheep, who took action to benefit the sheep? Their true shepherd! Notably, it was not their own former bad kings of Israel, and not the king of Assyria, and not the king of Babylon, but rather it was the true King of Israel, the true shepherd of Israel, the LORD God of Israel who took action to benefit His sheep and to secure them. The flock received back its pasture from

their real shepherd. The very flock that had been lost in verse 6, was now found in verse 19. Despite their former shepherds having led them astray in verse 6, the sheep are now guided safely home in verse 20. They are now home, free, safe, innocent, and unblemished by sin. (v.20). Israel as they went into exile were filled with sin. Israel, as they came out of exile were cleansed of sin. (v.20). The difference was that the LORD will pardon them, in verse 20.

It was this reversal, this pardon by the LORD that permitted Israel's life and story to begin afresh, with new potential, and new hope. The real determiner for God's people was not governments of nations over them or near them or attacking them. It was the LORD God alone, who gave His people life, and restored them to their good pastures. It was the LORD who presided over, limited, and documented all the threats to His people, and it was the LORD who protected, provided, and pardoned His people, the sheep of His pasture. Psalm 100:3, "*Know that the Lord, he is God! It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.*"

Conclusion:

1. Rejoice in the gift of repentance.

God is the One who has given us tears of repentance. Verse 4, "...*in those days and in that time....the people of God shall come together, weeping as they come, and they shall seek the LORD their God.*" The weeping is the evidence of repenting – when we are convicted and we turn from sin and wrong back to God.

Westminster Larger Catechism, Q76, What is repentance unto life?
Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, and upon the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, he so grieves for and hates his sins, as that he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavoring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.

2. Rejoice in the full forgiveness of all of our sins.

Verse 20, "...*iniquity shall be sought, ... and there shall be none...sin [shall be sought], and none shall be found, for I will pardon...*"

There was sin everywhere in Israel. This book has told us about their idolatry, lying, cheating, stealing, killing. But in verse 20, the guilt of God's people had vanished! It points us to Christ, as verse 20 says, "in those days and in that time..." We are living in those days and in that time. The hammer of God's justice for our sins already fell on Jesus, and then He rose again, and we rose with Him, by faith. Christ the Good Shepherd came for us, and cleansed away our sins on the cross, when He took the sins and nailed them there, and then He rose again! As a result, we have full forgiveness. Full atonement. God has pardoned all of our sins. In this we rejoice.

3. Rejoice in the everlasting nature of God's promise as our Good Shepherd, which means we cannot mess it up and lose it.

In our study we saw it in verse 5, "...*come let us join ourselves to The LORD in an everlasting covenant that will never be forgotten.*" God's promise is everlasting. God's promise will never be forgotten. We rejoice in being rescued from the devil, from the world, from death, and we rejoice in even being rescued from ourselves. We are rescued from our own sinful natures, our own sinful desires. We cannot lose our own salvation. We are secure in God's hands, secure in green pastures. We cannot fall away from God, because God's promise to us is everlasting!

We rejoice in this! We belong to God and there is nothing that can threaten that love and commitment from God to us! Jesus died and rose again for us, so He will never forget those loving actions. Jesus will never forget us.

The people of Jerusalem had bad shepherds, which meant they had bad kings, and bad priests. The result was God's people were like lost sheep being led astray, sinning against the LORD, who was their home, their habitation (v.7), their pasture! In verse 18, The LORD is the one who restored them to their pasture, which was the LORD Himself.

We rejoice that we can trust Jesus our Shepherd to take care of us, and to take care of everything else that we need, and at the end, to take us safely all the way home.

Just like the believers then, so today we have the same Shepherd of our souls. Our desires of our souls shall be satisfied. Psalm 23:1,3, "*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not lack anything...He restores my soul.*"